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ABSTRACT

The review of research and literature discusses the relationship between academic research activity and the teaching of English as a second language (ESL). Attitudes toward the research/teaching relationship are examined, and criticisms over the past decade are summarized. A model is offered of the most common, top-down conception of the flow of information from researchers to teachers. The contexts and forums for discussion of research are explored from a teaching perspective, and it is suggested that they do not foster two-way communication between the community of teachers and that of researchers. Differences in focus of these two communities are further examined by looking at the central topics of journals in the ESL field as they have evolved over time. A more complex model for the flow of ideas between academe and the classroom is then presented, and it is suggested that one "weak link" in this connection, due to market pressures, is that between teachers and instructional materials developers. Finally, a more teacher-oriented model of research activity is outlined, one which does not call for teachers to become researchers in order to participate in the dialogue between the communities. Contains 15 references. (MSE)

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Researchers and teachers in ELT: united or divided?

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Abstract

This paper discusses academic research activity and classrooms and the flow of ideas between them in TESOL. A brief selection of attitudes to the research/teaching binary is given, together with a summary of the kinds of criticisms made of the relationship and how they have changed over the last ten years. Then a model is given of the commonest (top-down) conception of the flow of information from researchers to teachers. The kinds of public domain and forums for discussion of research are critiqued, from a teaching perspective, suggesting that these do not foster easy two-way communication between the mass of teachers and the mass of researchers, despite the growth in activity such as action research by teachers. The differences in focus of the two communities is further investigated by analysis of the central topics of more 'academic' and less 'academic' journals in our field, again looking at this from a chronological perspective. A more complex model of the flow of ideas between academe and classrooms is then presented, suggesting that a particular 'weak-link' in terms of market pressures is that between researchers and materials developers. Finally, a more teacher oriented model of research activity is presented, which does not call for the teaching profession to turn themselves into researchers in order to participate in the dialogue.

Introduction

This paper summarises a range of articles, in chronological order, on the research/practice or theory/implementation division in TESOL, taken from the late eighties, and middle and late nineties. Rather than presenting an abstract model of information flow, the paper aims to look at some of the actual processes of influence and communication between the different domains and consider in particular the role of personal, career and market pressures in these relationships. Since for the majority of teachers the published texts which they buy, or come in contact with, the most common are classroom materials, another important point of focus for the paper is the status and role of commercially produced materials in the relationship.

Attitudes to the research/teaching binary

In 1990 Jo and Steven McDonough presented the findings of a survey of attitudes among teachers to research in a paper called 'What's the Use of Research?' (McDonough and McDonough,1990). In their paper they briefly outlined a top-down model of the flow of ideas in ELT with researchers at the top of the pile and teachers at the bottom, the passive recipients of any research findings. These findings, they argued, were often seen as irrelevant to teachers' working lives, since they were carried out by people whose work showed 'unfamiliarity with the practice of language teaching'. Furthermore, they suggested that results came to the teacher as *faites accomplis* the terms of reference of which were, in turn, unfamiliar to the practitioner. They pointed to 'a reluctance [on the part of researchers] to build bridges between theory and practice, showing how a top-down approach might have relevance and applicability' (McDonough and McDonough, 1990, p.103).

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The potential for using research findings in materials was also challenged in the late 80s. For example Janet Holmes (1988) questioned the consistency, nature and presentation of research findings in terms of what material developers need, and Marion Williams (1988) pointed out that research work into language needed to account for both the complexity of real discourse and the fact that materials developers should be aware that non-native speaker teachers, potentially, lack confidence in dealing with these complexities.

In 1994 the relationship between theory and practice in the Applied Linguistics context was again critiqued in Mark Clarke's paper 'The Dysfunctions of the Theory/Practice Discourse' (Clarke, 1994). He concluded that the lack of 'particularisability' of research findings together with a lack of recognition of the complex matrix of untheorised choices made in classrooms led to a 'disablement' of teachers in the Theory/Practice relationship. He suggested that teachers needed to become 'critical consumers' of theory, with, in its most extreme expression, a total 'reorientation' of the profession putting teachers in the driving seat. This was a view echoed in the more 'hands on' journal *Modern English Teacher*, again in 1994, in a keynote article on the teaching/learning process by Michael Grenfell, who pointed out that: 'A general disposition or approach [in research findings] is therefore encouraged, whilst specific activities or techniques are left for teachers and textbook writers to create.' (Grenfell, 1994, p.9). And in 1994 also Tom Hutchinson and Eunice Torres challenged the 'apathy' and 'hostility' towards the textbook in Applied Linguistics literature, pointing out that a good textbook can both be an 'agent of change' and a provider of structure and stability in sometimes unstable classroom conditions.

More recently still Jill Burton, who is not alone in this, in reporting a major project of teacher participation in reflective practice and research in Australia, has argued that

the nature of the traditional science oriented research paradigm is anathema to the educational context, a context which, she argues, requires a more cyclical or organic approach (Burton,1998). She outlines particularly clearly the practical barriers which stand in the way of teachers realistically contributing to research without a well-funded and long-term project structure behind them. And these are the types of professional issues which recur in the literature together with a lack of career structure, lack of professional development funding, lack of room in the curriculum to incorporate change and so on. However, I will be suggesting that this deficit model of the teacher in the research to classrooms process is unduly negative and demanding, since it implies that teachers are not already full-time professionals with their own developmental foci which do not necessarily include undertaking the core activities of another part of the profession, viz. academics.

As a recent challenge to the service which the research community provides to the teaching community, echoing the problems mentioned ten years earlier by Holmes or Williams, we can see Roger Gower's 1998 pithy challenge to the scope and consistency of reference grammars in which he questions the rationale behind terms such as 'an important use of the past continuous' together with the patchiness of coverage when different grammar books are compared (Gower, 1998).

Even from this brief review, it can be seen that there are several kinds of 'gap' which have been articulated over the last ten years between the two sides of the profession. These range from criticisms of 'one way' traffic between the two parties; problems of content of research projects; problems of communication in terms of research findings in the early 1990s to views that the content is not so much the problem as the level of specificity, and to an emerging challenge to the usefulness of the research paradigm itself. The strongest statement of the dichotomy is that there is a dialogue of the

aurally challenged between researchers and classroom practitioners in which neither side understands, values or empathises with the core activities of the other. At the other extreme the relationship can be seen as fundamentally 'symbiotic', to use Rod Ellis's term (Ellis, 1998), but one in which the professional contexts of the two bodies militate against ready communication between the them: teachers are busy professionals who, if they have time at all beyond the demands of their students, lesson preparation, marking, course administration, time-tabling and finding that extra room for the pronunciation class which has had to be split, will devote it to reflective or action research, materials development tailored to their courses, or learning how to run a new CALL package the school has invested in. University-based Applied Linguists are busy professionals who need to get published to develop their academic career, and who, in order to do this, must build on previous research carried out by like minded individuals. An important point of difference between teachers and researchers is that the payback to the latter for doing research is reflected immediately and directly in the value placed on it by their institution, and in turn on them for doing it. For the teacher the payback from research activity, other than individual satisfaction, is generally much more of a gamble and depends on the system of professional development existing in their institution.

Figure 1 attempts to show the 'classical' top-down conception of the flow of ideas between academics and teachers and the next section provides a critique of the domains for communication between the two.

Critique of domain of research findings

There are a number of conventional forums for the interchange of ideas which can be considered potential 'bridges' between research and classroom activity. However each of these has their drawback for the teacher, entailing as they do commitment to

activity above and beyond their daily job. Our Centre is based in a building next to a University library, yet most of my teaching colleagues have little free time to go in there, find an appropriate article or book let alone sit down, read it, or write a response to it. And the vast majority of teachers do not share this proximity to research publications, imagine yourself teaching in a small town in Poland, or Japan, or the UK. Equally, unless supported by the institution the majority of teachers can rarely find the time and money to attend even a day conference in their own country, let alone a 'big' conference in another part of the world. Those reading this article should consider, if they are still 'chalkface' teachers, what circumstances or level of personal commitment gives them the time to do so and how many of their colleagues will also find, or would want to find, the same opportunity. Academics who feel that they do meet teachers at conferences and other events need to bear in mind how very few institutions will support attendance at such events, and of those enlightened few how few people within them will be supported. In order to gain funding to attend, very often a teacher must have a presentation of some kind accepted, and this generally means learning how to use the academics' discourse and presenting on topics which fit the prevailing scholarly idea of what is relevant and acceptable. Therefore those teachers who do sit in the same room with and even talk to academic applied linguists are not necessarily very representative of the ELT profession as a whole. Action research by teachers, another possible pathway to dialogue, again needs the backing of the organisation in which it is carried out if it is to be more than the work of an individual, in their own time, working for their own satisfaction and development, and results of such work need to reach a high status public domain such as an academic conference or a publication if it is to have credibility. Without

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scholarly credibility it will have little influence on the core activities of academic researchers.

In addition, if, as the literature suggests, the bulk of research activity, and even the research paradigm itself, is seen as irrelevant to the teaching community there is little incentive for teachers to engage with it. Therefore, in addition to the 'gaps' of knowledge, scope, relevance and so on which have been pointed to in my introduction between research activity and classrooms, there are several kinds of 'real-world' barriers standing in the way of easy two-way communication between researchers and teachers: the level of opportunity for teachers to access research findings on a regular basis (ie post-training) is something of a lottery; the communication of findings is generally carried out in forms of discourse designed for the academic community; the opportunity for the majority of teachers to influence research activity by active participation is negligible; incentives for researchers to be influenced by teachers are equally few and far between.

Model 1:

Academic research
Action Research?
Articles and books?
Conferences?
Materials Development?
Published materials
Classrooms

However, the 'bad news' version of the research-practice relationship has not been without critics. In the same volume of TESOL Quarterly as Clarke's dysfunctions paper, Teresa Pica (1994) summarised the applicability of research to questions arising from the classroom. Similarly the themed volume of TESOL Quarterly in 1994 on research orientations showed the 'state of the art' of research into classroom activity (if not activities), for example, Tarone on needs analysis, Spada on classroom management, Pennycook on classroom ideologies and so on. That the issue is still current can be seen from the fact that in 1998 Rod Ellis again challenged Clarke's 'toxic' view of the research/teaching binary, offering suggestions for the fostering of a greater 'interdependence' between teachers and researchers, something I will be returning to in my conclusion. Furthermore, there is evidence that some researchers, at least, are addressing the complex realities of the classroom pointed to by Clarke, Grenfell, Burton and others. For example Simon Borg's work, represented most recently in his article 'The Use of Grammatical Terminology in the Second Language Classroom', puts the teacher at the heart of the analysis and concludes 'To a certain extent ... teachers (sic) decisions about terminology were also taken interactively, in real-time during the course of their work, and not simply predetermined' (Borg, 1999, p.121). More than a nod here to Clarke's complex matrix of decisions made in real-time by teachers (Clarke, 1994).

And those who see themselves primarily as teachers are certainly not as passive as they once may have been, or as some of the summaries outlined above might suggest as we see the burgeoning of Action Research, and the growth of publications in this area including handbooks of action research for teachers. A brief but vigorous defence of the distinctive nature and value of this kind of teacher/classroom research activity, and summary of the main issues can be found in John Field's 1998 article in

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Modern English Teacher 'Feedback: Who Owns Classroom Research?' (a response to Glenn Hawes's article on the role of the teacher in research). His conclusion chimes in with many others outlined above suggesting that the objectives of academic-led research and teacher-led research are different, with the former focusing more on generalisability and the latter on '*the impact of their teaching upon their learners*.[original emphasis]' (Field, 1998, p.49) and with less concern for assessing the universal applicability of their findings (or indeed publishing them). However, if research activity carried out by teachers does not reach the public domain in some form, it cannot influence other teachers, let alone show the way to academics to suggest topics which teachers find relevant.

The notions of public domain, and the acceptance of ideas as current or relevant by the wider profession, are ones which I will be pursuing in the rest of this article; and to begin this I would now like to turn to a brief survey of seminal journals in Applied Linguistics, chosen for their central and stated relevance to ELT. I will be dealing with two main ideas: the differences in terms of the topic and level of focus in the research/practice relationship, and any evidence for divergence or convergence between the two sides.

Survey of journals

Tables 1-3 show the results of a brief survey of journals in the field taken from the years 1988, 1994 and 1998. The journals chosen were: *Modern English Teacher*, *ELT Journal*, *TESOL Quarterly*, *Applied Linguistics* , and the more phonemically oriented journal, *Language and Speech*. The latter was chosen for its strong scholarly focus on research findings primarily within the 'science paradigm' which I have presented as coming under challenge in recent literature on research in ELT. These journals, therefore, represented something of a cline from a very 'hands on' journal, *Modern*

English Teacher, to a classically 'academic' one, *Language and Speech*. Furthermore, the latter acted as a check on the methodology of this survey, as will be discussed below.

In order to investigate the topic focus of five different journals article titles contained in them from all three years were first grouped and a simple word frequency list was made according to journal. The top six content words ranked by frequency are given in Table 1. The results for *Language and Speech* are interesting in that they contrast quite clearly with the content words shown in the columns for the other journals and lend some support for the method of the survey, despite the very small sample. That is to say four of the items are uncontroversially central to the journal's scope: 'speech', 'syllable', 'accent' and 'acoustic', and the relevance of other two items to the discipline ('structure' and 'perception') is clear in context. Therefore, there is some justification for thinking that the ranked content words reflect core foci each of for the journals. The top ranked words in the 'hands on' journals are 'classroom and 'teacher', whereas in the academic journals the focus is on the more abstract ideas of 'ESL' or 'L2'. Within the lower rankings there can be seen a similar division with the first journal, *Modern English Teacher*, having the strongest focus on skills and activities, and *Applied Linguistics* having the clearest interest in general, theoretical concepts such as 'discourse' or 'language'.

Initially, these results may be considered to have something of a 'so what' feel about them. It may seem obvious that the more pedagogic journals will be more interested in classrooms and activities, and the more academic journals in theoretical abstractions. However, this should be challenged in two respects. The academic half of our profession is an applied, rather than a theoretical, discipline and, given this, the clear lack of *any* overlap in key words from the sample taken over the last ten years

(apart from 'language' in column two and column four) between the 'research' journals and the 'practice' journals is remarkable. Furthermore, this disparity is not simply a product of the difference between a scholarly and a more popular journal since the terms in column five (the highly scholarly *Language and Speech*) are less general and abstract, if anything, than those in columns three and four (*Tesol Quarterly* and *Applied Linguistics*). That is to say, it would be possible for a great deal more respectable-sounding academic research to be carried out with titles containing words like 'classroom', 'teacher' or 'learner' (surely some of the key and quite specific concepts in our profession on a par with 'syllable', 'perception' or 'accent' in the acoustic sciences) if these central classroom-oriented topics were of greater concern to researchers.

Table 2 again supports the conclusion that the theory and the implementation sides of the profession are rather differently focused. In this *Language and Speech* was excluded since it does not claim to have a central concern with ELT. The method here was to take lexical items associated with the research/teaching binary (listed in column 5) and to indicate which journal titles had mentioned them more than twice in the samples taken over the last ten years. Neither of the two 'teaching' oriented journals mentioned research, and similarly concepts such as 'teacher', 'task' or 'learner' did not score highly on the academic side. These results are extremely tentative due to the limited sample and the non-random choice by year. However, there is, I suggest food for further investigation here.

Despite the apparent disparity of focus between the two sides of the profession there are some grounds for optimism in the results shown in Table 3. Here the titles were grouped chronologically rather than by title and there is a suggestion in the top ranking content words that the profession as a whole is moving away from more

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abstract and towards more specific constructs. Thus in 1988 the top ranked word was 'Language' whereas in 1998 it is 'Classroom' and specific skills such as writing and listening are starting to appear in the top six places.

Topic focus of different journals

Modern English Teacher	ELT Journal	TESOL Quarterly	Applied Linguistics	Language and Speech
Classroom	Teacher	ESL	L2	Speech
English	Language	Academic	Discourse	Structure
Writing	ELT	Grammar	Grammar	Syllable
Teaching	Learner	Research	Language	Perception
Activity	Training	Issue	Linguistic	Accent
Humour	Teaching	L2	SL	Acoustic

Table 1: Top six content words of 5 Applied Linguistics journals, surveyed from 1988, 1994, 1998

Modern English Teacher	ELT Journal	TESOL Quarterly	Applied Linguistics	2 plus occurrences of:
✓✓	✓✓	--	✓	Teacher/teaching
✓✓	--	✓	--	Classroom
--	--	✓✓	✓	Research
--	--	--	✓	Materials/textbook
✓	--	--	--	Task/Activity
✓	✓✓	✓	--	Student/learner

Table 2: Content words with a frequency of more than 2 in four journals

1988	1994	1998
Language	Teaching	Classroom
Teacher	ELT	L2
Academic	Language	Writing
ESL	English	English
Learner	Correction	Grammar
SL	Development	Listening

Table 3: Top six content words in four journals by date

So to summarise, this brief survey gives some suggestion that:

- In keeping with the commonest criticism of research in the field of ELT, the research based journals do deal with more general and abstract topics than the more 'hands on' journals

- The core concerns of the two sides, teaching and research, as represented in these journals, seem to have little overlap if keywords from their article titles are compared;
- A comparison with a highly academic (non-ELT focused) journal whose content vocabulary is quite specific suggests that respectable research could be undertaken into the more concrete topics dealt with by the 'hands on' journals;
- There might be indications of a move underway in the literature from the general towards the specific in the field as a whole.

However, an investigation of some of the journals in the field does not fully cover the space as far as classroom practitioners are concerned. As I have suggested, published journals are not the first port of call for the busy teacher looking for new ideas. Therefore, the next section deals with the role of a source which all teachers whom I know greet enthusiastically: new teaching materials. Therefore, the next part of this discussion returns to the mechanisms by which ideas might transfer between academe and classrooms and looks particularly at the potential for materials to act as a bridge between academe and classrooms.

Processes of communication and transference of ideas between research findings and classrooms

Figure 2 presents a more complex picture of the transference of ideas between academe and classrooms than the model shown in Figure 1. In it are five domains in which ideas can exist, be scrutinised/assessed, taken up or abandoned. These are the 'Ivory Tower' of the individual academic; 'Academe'; 'Applications'; 'the Market' of commercial publication and finally 'Classrooms'. Within these is presented a logical sequence suggesting a model of a route or pathway for a research finding from an academic to a teacher. As in all models the elements within it are idealised, for

example, no account is taken of the fact that a teacher might also be a materials developer. The figure suggests that at each stage of the route 'gatekeepers' influence the currency and progress of an idea. For example, before an academic's idea can reach the public domain in a book or an article it is assessed by peer reviewers/readers and editors. The idea is then available to, say, influence the design of the syllabus of a new ELT grammar textbook. Before this same idea can reach the market in this format it is again assessed this time by materials developers, whose attitude to the idea will be 'is it usable?'. If so, the ideas now in the form of book proposals are in turn scrutinised by publishers. The key question within the domain of the market is 'is it profitable?', and books which make it through this hurdle are then available for the teacher to scrutinise/assess them with their own particular needs and classrooms in mind.

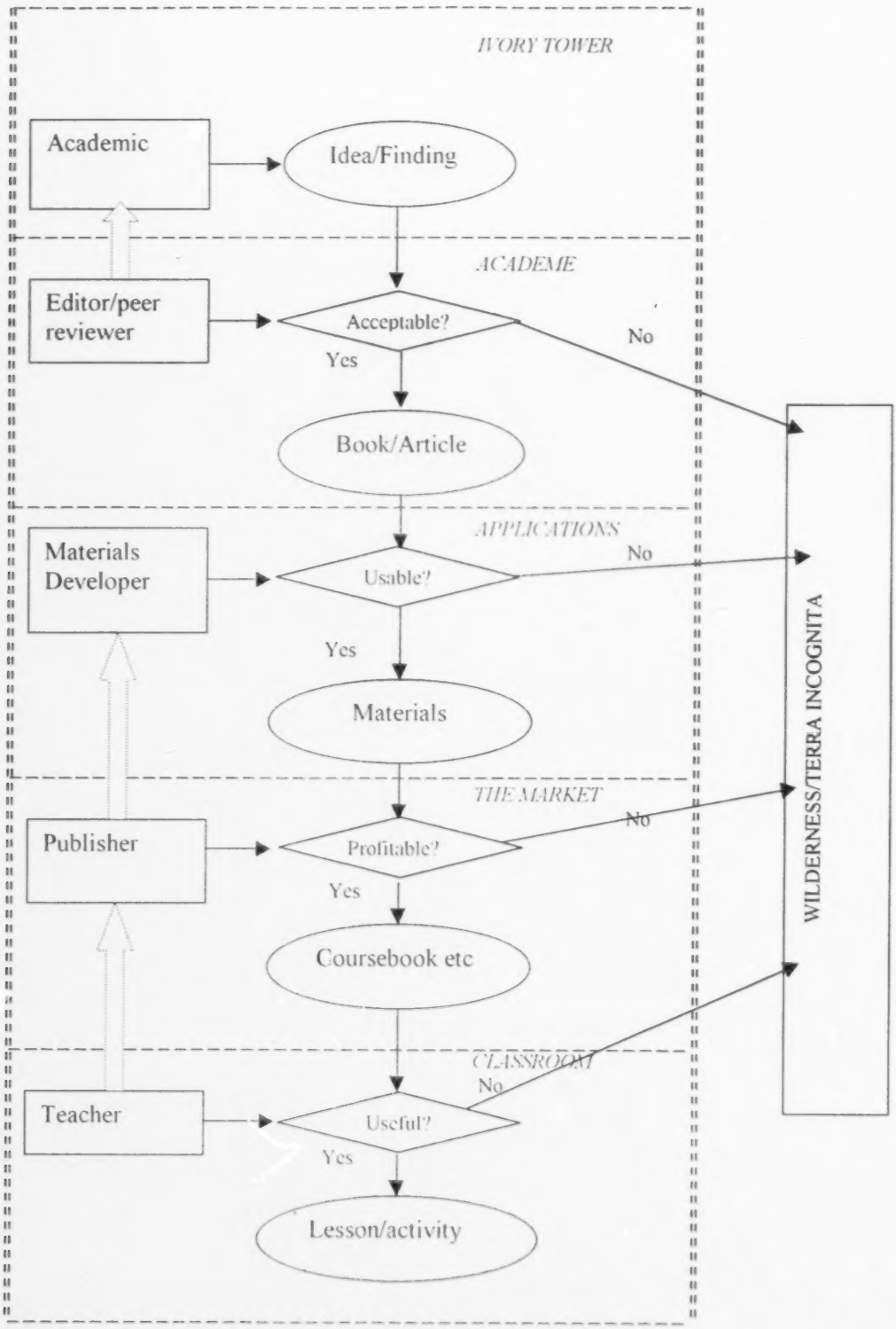
Rather than a homogenous conception of the applicability of a finding this model attempts to capture some of the very different criteria for take up of an idea which influence its potential transformation from academic finding to classroom adjunct. Central to the model is the notion that the gate-keeping questions asked depend strongly on the domain and people who are asking them. An excellent research finding will not have an easy passage into the applied side of the profession unless (in the present state of things) it just happens to fit with the dominant criteria of the domains which it must pass through.

Also represented in the diagram are the upward relationships of influence between the different groups and individuals in the process. In market terms, teachers are a highly powerful pressure group who strongly influence publishers by what they choose to buy or not buy. A link of influence and mutual interest, therefore, exists between publishers and teachers. Equally, there is a strong reciprocal relationship between

publishers and materials developers who cannot exist without one another. As strong, but slightly different in nature is the bond between individual academics and the peer reviewers and editors who guard the public domain of academe. Classically, the academic journal is above market concerns and individuals acting within it are interested in pushing back the boundaries of knowledge with little self-interest. Nevertheless, there is some evidence that academics too are coming to place a monetary value on their ideas and raise questions of fees for articles, copyright or licensing issues (Macfie, 1998).

Significantly, in the present state of things, it is hard to see a general relationship of influence between the groups in the domain of ELT applications (especially materials developers) and those in academe. Again, it might be the case that a small number of academics are also materials developers (myself being one of them) but in terms of general pressures and influences there are few strong links of common interest between the domains.

This lack of communication and realisation of mutual need between the world of ideas and the world of applications in ELT, I would argue, is one of the greatest 'weak-spots' in the profession and something I will return to in the next section.



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Towards a reoriented model of communication between academe, the market and classrooms

The currency of the research/classrooms debate as reflected in my introduction means that there are also a number of solutions or ways forward being offered by those discussing the issue. These range from Jill Burton (1998) who suggests that more government funded projects such as the one she reports are a necessity, to Freeman and Johnstone (1998) who argue that the 'knowledge-base' for Applied Linguistics needs to be refocused on the 'activity of teaching itself', to Hawes (1997) who sees more teacher friendly presentation of research findings as the answer, or Ellis (1998) who suggests we need to consider what kinds of research are most likely to lead to interdependence between the two sides. My final diagram attempts to incorporate some of these key ideas, the need for incentives and funding, the need for better communication, teacher input in the setting of research agendas and so on. However, what this attempts is a to provide some sense of the mechanisms by which better communication might come about, hence the presentation of it in the form of an Internet based discussion forum.

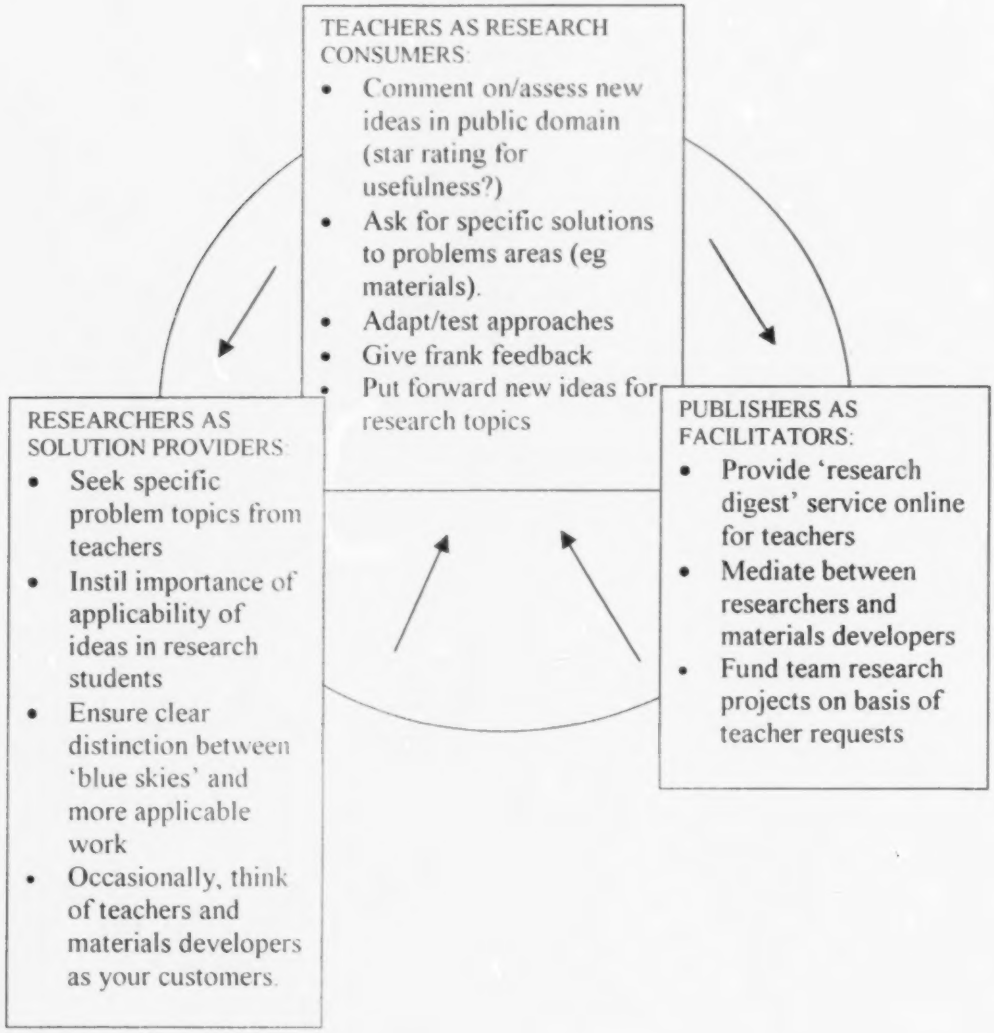
Fundamental to this model is the notion that teachers should not feel the need to turn themselves into researchers in order to get relevant, usable findings. This is like telling someone that they are inadequate to use a computer without learning how to carry out Lisp programming.

The model also suggests that part at least of the research profession should be engaged in work that is, if not commissioned by teachers, then takes its genesis from questions raised by the teaching arm of the profession. Furthermore, a clear distinction should be drawn between projects which are asking difficult, fundamental questions about EFL and those which are pursing an established route to new findings

which can be applied. An unkind critic of EFL research could argue that much of it falls in a comfortable 'middle-road' between these two and neither pushes back the boundaries nor produces usable results.

One of the most direct and teacher-friendly routes for new research findings into the classroom I have argued would be through commercial materials. However, as I suggested earlier it is not clear what links of mutual interest exist at present between academe and the domain of applications and the market. My final model places the teacher at the apex of things, to reflect the powerful status they have as knowledgeable practitioner in an Applied Science and valued consumer of commercially published materials and, potentially, of research findings. My hope is that this type of conception of the relationships between academe, commerce and the classroom (one which reflects some of the very real commercial 'muscle' which teachers have) might help teachers to build confidence as professionals, rather than as deficient researchers playing 'catch-up' with real Applied Linguists.

Model 3: (eg Newsgroup/web-site forum)


TEACHERS AS RESEARCH CONSUMERS:
• Comment on/assess new ideas in public domain (star rating for usefulness?)
• Ask for specific solutions to problems areas (eg materials).
• Adapt/test approaches
• Give frank feedback
• Put forward new ideas for research topics
RESEARCHERS AS SOLUTION PROVIDERS:
• Seek specific problem topics from teachers
• Instil importance of applicability of ideas in research students
• Ensure clear distinction between 'blue skies' and more applicable work
• Occasionally, think of teachers and materials developers as your customers.
PUBLISHERS AS FACILITATORS:
• Provide 'research digest' service online for teachers
• Mediate between researchers and materials developers
• Fund team research projects on basis of teacher requests

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